



Education before enforcement

Getting licensing decisions right



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The safety problem in taxi and private-hire isn't a shortage of powers or a need for ever-bigger crackdowns. It's authorities not consistently using the powers they already have—too often defaulting to paper exercises (DBS tick-boxes, template letters) instead of a full, evidence-led judgement about whether a person is safe and suitable to carry the public. Where authorities apply the law and guidance rigorously, safety follows. Where they don't, "more enforcement" is just noise.

The law already sets a high bar—if you actually apply it

Outside London, councils must not grant a driver licence unless satisfied the person is fit and proper, and may suspend or revoke if that ceases to be true (LG(MP)A 1976 ss.51, 59, 61). London uses equivalent tests under the Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998 and the London Cab Order for taxis. The DfT Statutory Taxi & PHV Standards (2020) set the playbook—safeguarding, complaints handling, acting on non-conviction police intelligence, and consistent decision-making—and authorities must have regard to them. The 2023 Best Practice Guidance tells authorities to embed these expectations in policy and training so they actually change decisions.

The Institute of Licensing frames the practical test: "Would you let someone you care about travel alone with this person, at any time, day or night?"—a plain-English way to move beyond paperwork into a holistic risk judgement.

Abdication by paper: when "checks" replace judgement

We've seen what happens when licensing is treated as form-filling rather than public protection. Post-Rotherham diagnostics highlighted corporate failure—intelligence not integrated, concerns not acted on, and licensing treated as a tick-box process. The fix was better licensing decisions, safeguarding conditions and inter-agency information flow—not just more roadside stops.

Cross-border hiring isn't inherently unsafe—it's uneven standards that make it so

Cross-border becomes a safety vector only when licensing thresholds diverge so widely that drivers can "licence-shop" in lenient areas and work elsewhere. The Government's Task & Finish Group called for national minimum standards precisely to remove that inconsistency; level the floor and the "cross-border problem" largely evaporates as a safety issue.

Cross-border may remain a competition issue but do we regulate competition in the taxi and private hire industry? We do not.

Driver education lifts standards — and shrinks the need for enforcement

Enforcement is a backstop. The first lever is raising competence so issues don't arise in the first place.

- Safeguarding awareness: DfT's Statutory Standards expect authorities to require safeguarding training; TfL and many councils now mandate it. Training helps licensees

spot early-warning signs and know what to do, who to tell, and when—preventing harm and reducing downstream enforcement.

- Disability equality & lawful service: Drivers have legal duties to assist disabled passengers (e.g., wheelchair users) and make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010. Targeted disability-equality training improves compliance, cuts complaints, and avoids sanctionable breaches. (LGA supports making this mandatory.)
- De-escalation & conflict management: Transit industry recommended practice shows structured de-escalation training reduces assaults and incidents against operators—translating directly to fewer enforcement events linked to disputes.
- Hazard perception & professional driving: Broad “driver ed” alone isn’t magic, but targeted programmes (hazard-perception training, simulator-based refreshers) do improve safety-critical skills and are associated with fewer crashes in professional contexts—raising the overall service standard authorities expect.

So what? Make these modules licensing conditions (grant and renewal) and you increase the certainty of competent behaviour, which regulatory science shows beats simply increasing the severity of sanctions.

Higher standards may well have the effect of reducing or, at least, managing driver numbers. As a result, not only is safety improved but earnings increase. Congestion

concerns driven by cross-border issues and the popularity of urban hotspots begin to fall.

Mobility Exchange’s Hummingbird training program embeds all of these core skills and more, ensuring drivers are equipped to deal with the highest levels of risk.

Regulatory science: certainty + competence beat blunt severity

Deterrence research is consistent: raising the certainty and swiftness of appropriate action changes behaviour more than cranking up severity. And Responsive Regulation works best: start with education/support, escalate only when needed—the enforcement pyramid. In licensing terms: clear rules and competent, trained drivers prevent most problems; visible, proportionate sanctions keep the system credible.

A practical recipe (and a provocation)

- Codify the decision test. Train officers and committees on the IoL “safe & suitable” framework; require written reasons that engage with the individual’s actual risk, not just whether papers were supplied.
- Wire in intelligence. Implement police–licensing information-sharing guidance so non-conviction intel routinely informs grant, renewal and review.
- Standardise the floor. Adopt the DfT Statutory Standards and align to Best Practice 2023; support national minimum standards so cross-border equals the same safety bar everywhere.

- Make education the licence. Mandate (and refresh) safeguarding, disability-equality, hazard-perception and de-escalation training—turning competence into a preventative compliance tool, not a remedial one.
- Use s.61 decisively where risk is credible. Suspension/revocation remains essential; the point is that you'll need it less when you've raised the standard at the gate and in service.

The blunt truth

When members/officers hide behind paperwork, they're abdicating the statutory

responsibility to decide whether a human being is safe to carry the public. And when we skip driver education, we set people up to fail. The remedy isn't louder "enforcement days." It's better licensing and better training: educated, confident decision-makers and competent, well-prepared drivers. Education before enforcement—not because it's soft, but because it works and the law already supports it.

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